

The rise of ecoanxiety: How smoke in Alberta might affect your mental health

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Body

CALGARY—For people in Fort McMurray who lived through the fire that engulfed their city, smoke from the British Columbia wildfires is an unwelcome reminder.

University of Alberta psychiatry professor Vincent Agyapong, who sees patients in Fort McMurray four days per month, said he always worries about the summer wildfire season exacerbating symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

“It’s really a concern,” Agyapong said. “The nature of PTSD is that if there are any triggers or anything that sets off a reminder of a traumatic event, then it tends to escalate the symptoms that the patient experiences. So clearly, the ongoing wildfires in B.C. — some of the victims who are watching the wildfires on television are reliving the experience.”

On Wednesday, special air-quality statements were in effect for most of Alberta due to the smoke, with the exception of the northeast and southeast corners of the province. Most of B.C. and part of western Saskatchewan were also affected.

Hot weather and dry, windy conditions can make wildfire season worse; the average area burned in Canada each year has almost doubled since the ’70s, and experts say human-caused climate change is a major factor. Hundreds of fires are currently burning in B.C., with thousands of people affected by evacuation notices and alerts.

Environment Canada meteorologist Dan Kulak said there’s no telling when Alberta might be out of the woods for smoke this year, since wildfire season can last into October.

Health warnings for children, elderly people and people with respiratory illnesses are always issued with air-quality alerts, but experts say that lingering smoke, or other results of climate change, can also have unseen mental-health impacts.

Even people who haven’t directly experienced trauma like the Fort McMurray evacuation can be affected. A 2017 report from the American Psychological Association says “ecoaxiety” — a term coined to encompass feelings of stress and loss related to climate change and the future — is an emerging field of study.

Susan Clayton, a psychology professor at the College of Wooster in Ohio, said an active wildfire season can be an especially visceral reminder of the dangers of climate change. In California, she has heard people talk about how wildfires in the state make people more aware of how environmental changes can impact them.

“Many of us, even if we’re concerned about climate change, we can kind of put it in the back of our minds,” Clayton said. “But if you have that smoke, it’s a very vivid reminder.”

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University of Waterloo public health professor Warren Dodd was on the research team for a study that examined the impact of a smoke-filled summer in 2014 on Yellowknife and several surrounding communities. Wildfire smoke lingered from mid-June to the end of August that year, driving people indoors when they would usually be outside enjoying the warmer weather.

“People in general felt isolated from their neighbours and from their communities,” Dodd said. “The key thing was isolation. But then on top of that, some people expressed feelings of sadness and even anger.”

Interviews for the study were done a year after that wildfire season, but Dodd said people still had ongoing anxieties about their experience that summer as well as concerns about the future.

“We had one interviewee say, ‘As much as I hate to say this, I believe that this is the new normal.’ And that language I’m seeing come out a lot from Alberta and B.C. right now,” Dodd said.

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Clayton said researchers are just beginning to examine the impact of the “worry factor.” People are talking about their fears more, but there isn’t enough data on how big of a problem increasing anxieties are.

Still, she said talking about these fears openly can help mobilize people and give them a sense of purpose in addressing uncertainties about the future.

Agyapong said that kind of communication has proven helpful for his patients still dealing with the aftermath of the Fort McMurray fire.

“It’s about educating the community to pull together to support one another,” he said. “And you don’t need to be in Fort McMurray to play that role.

“Just calling those people to check on them and see how they are doing is a very effective, therapeutic intervention.”

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The rise of ecoanxiety: How smoke in Alberta might affect your mental health

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